Reviewer's report

Title: Bismarck or Beveridge: a beauty contest between dinosaurs

Version: 2 Date: 19 February 2007

Reviewer: Alan Shiell

Reviewer's report:

General
In general I agree that the revised manuscript addresses my concerns. There is one exception though that relates to the treatment of equity. Reference to the work of Wagstaff and van Doorslaer is useful but not sufficient. The authors accept the reviewers assertion that equity is an important objective of health systems (and therefore is one dimension along which 'best' is to be decided) (point 1). They then suggest that equity is complex and that there is no good time series data on which to base an analysis (point 2). Finally they conclude (but only in the abstract) that it is possible to determine which health system is best empirically (point 3). These three points are contradictory. If points 1 and 2 are true then (3) is false. If points 2 and 3 are true then this contradicts the authors claim that they believe equity to be important.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

The conclusion drawn in the abstract needs to be revised to reflect the issue of equity. Is it important or not? If so, and data are deficient then how does the authors conclusion that it is possible to decide which system is best empirically stand up? The conclusion drawn in the body of the text is much more qualified. However, the lack of data in equity is not one of the qualifications. Again, this seems inconsistent with the authors’ stated response to reviewers that equity is important. If so, then surely lack of good data on equity implication smust be one of the qualifications one would wish to impose on their analysis specifically and more generally around similar empirical work.

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

None

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

None

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

'I declare that I have no competing interests'